Identity within My IDENTITY: Reimagining Decolonization of Arts Education Through Productive Sankofarism

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ABSTRACT

This paper sought to explore the decolonization of African arts education via Productive Sankofarism, a paradigm that critically engages with Africa's pre-colonial heritage to guide contemporary pedagogical practices. Inspired by the Akan concept of Sankofa, which emphasizes learning from the past to build the future, the study challenges the persistent Eurocentric dominance in African arts curricula and advocates for the incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), philosophies, and aesthetics. Juxtaposing the disruptive legacies of colonialism with the sociopolitical diversity, economic dynamism and cultural richness of pre-colonial Africa provided the historical context within which the paper's argument is framed. The study examines how western epistemologies and colonial systems suppressed African artistic traditions, creating a dissonance in identity and creative expression. By proposing Productive Sankofarism, the paper moves away from nostalgic traditionalism, highlighting selective retrieval, adaptation, and innovation to empower future generations of African artists and scholars. The findings underscore the potential of decolonized arts education to in still cultural pride, critical consciousness, and global relevance, thereby bridging historical rupture and enabling future agency.

Keywords: Arts Education, African Aesthetics, Decolonization, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Productive Sankofarism.

INTRODUCTION

Recent wave of student movements across African universities, such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, have reignited important debates about the unfinished business of decolonization (Grosz-Ngaté, 2020). These campaigns indicate a move from the first wins of political independence to a much deeper inquiry into the colonial legacies that continue to shape African institutions, curricula, and fundamental ways of knowing and being. This profound challenge is particularly relevant to arts education, a field that is naturally tied up with identity, culture, and social thought.

Arts education in many African higher institutions still contends with the traces of its colonial past, after decades of political independence. Eurocentrism dominates curricula by ignoring or distorting the continent's rich and diverse artistic heritage (Müller, 2018). For young African artists and academics who are trying to reconcile their lived experiences with the frameworks provided by their education, this pervasive Western orientation creates a significant disconnect that results in epistemic dependency and cultural alienation. Ironically, while conventional African art forms significantly influenced Western modernism (Bussotti & Bussotti, 2022), these very traditions frequently find themselves peripheral within the curricula of African universities themselves. The fact that the wellspring of inspiration for Western artistic innovation is devalued at its core suggests that the colonial project aimed not just at political or economic control, but at actively severing Africans from their own sources of creative and intellectual power, even when those sources were acknowledged and appropriated by the colonizer. This highlights the deep-seated nature of "coloniality" as a system of knowledge control, rather than solely political rule, implying a deliberate intellectual disempowerment.

Navigating the complex terrain of identity formation in contemporary Africa—an identity shaped by the layered interaction of pre-colonial legacies, the trauma of colonialism, the aspirations of post-independence nation-building, and the pervasive forces of globalization—necessitates a careful and forward-looking approach to decolonization. Inspired by the Akan concept of Sankofa—symbolized by a bird looking backward while its feet face forward, representing the wisdom of recovering from the past to guide the future (Dzokoto *et al*, 2018) —this study proposes the framework of Productive Sankofarism. This framework is neither a nostalgic return to an idealized past nor a rigid preservation of legacy. Instead, Productive Sankofarism advocates for a critical and selective engagement with Africa's multifaceted past. This strategy deliberately avoids the pitfalls of naive traditionalism and uses heritage to drive real progress. It involves deliberately recovering useful knowledge, philosophies, ethics, and aesthetic ideas from the past, critically assessing their applicability for contemporary problems, adapting them, and forging new ideas to create empowered futures.

This paper contends that Productive Sankofarism is a basic paradigm that best helps to decolonize African arts education. By fostering a critical engagement with the continent's varied past—its pre-colonial accomplishments, colonial tragedies, and post-independence challenges—this approach promotes innovative, culturally anchored, and globally relevant artistic practices and teaching methodologies. This, in turn, enables younger generations to negotiate and change their complex identities, thereby supporting Africa's continuous rebirth. The subsequent sections will follow this line of reasoning, first establishing the dynamism and diversity of pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa, then examining the profound effects of the colonial encounter, followed by an exploration of the arc of liberation and its ongoing challenges. Finally, the concept of Productive Sankofarism will be further developed and applied to the transformation of arts education, emphasizing the cultivation of mindsets necessary for transformative change.

Before the Rupture: Placing Pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa

Dismantling the persistent Eurocentric narratives that have long obscured the reality of Africa's past serves as a fundamental first step in any decolonial project. Colonial discourse often portrayed the continent as stagnant, "primitive," or devoid of history prior to European arrival, a viewpoint that helped to legitimize invasion and exploitation (Oke, 2006; Mungwini', 2011). This perspective deliberately overlooked or erased millennia of intricate societal development, innovation, and cultural achievement across the continent (Osuigwe, 2023; Adewale and Schepers, 2023). Reclaiming Africa's past requires recognizing its dynamism, diversity, and significant contributions to human civilization long before the colonial encounter.

Pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa was characterized by an exceptional variety of political systems and social structures, ranging from vast, centralized governments to smaller, decentralized communities (Osuigwe, 2023). There existed in West Africa powerful empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, that controlled extensive territories and trans-Saharan trade routes (Adewale and Schepers, 2023). Other notable centralized states included the Kingdoms of Kush and Aksum, Great Zimbabwe, and Kongo (Adewale and Schepers, 2023). In addition, numerous mid-sized kingdoms like the Ashanti and Yoruba city-states thrived, often based on trade and craft production (Austin, 2004). Beyond centralized states, political organization also took diverse forms, with many African societies being decentralized or "stateless," relying on lineage systems, councils of elders, age-set systems, or village-level governance (Ogot, 2018; Ekpo and Chime, 2016). These societies, even without a formal state apparatus, often possessed sophisticated systems for social control, conflict resolution, and economic cooperation, as exemplified by the Igbo, who developed a specialized and diversified economy despite lacking centralized governance (Ekpo and Chime, 2016).

The long-term economic effects of these indigenous governance systems indicate that pre-colonial institutions were active forces shaping developmental potential, rather than merely static backdrops. This potential was significantly disrupted or unevenly affected by the subsequent colonial imposition (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2016). Colonialism, therefore, did not build upon a *tabula rasa* but rather interfered with existing, varied, and sometimes highly effective indigenous systems of organization and governance. The variety and complexity of these pre-colonial political systems offer a distinct basis against which the disruptive impact of colonial imposition mat be more properly appreciated.

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Precolonial African civilizations possessed complex indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) that underpinned their economic operations, technical developments, and worldviews. Advances in Astronomy led to civilizations across the continent producing elaborate calendars and sites like Nabta Playa in Nubia (c. 4800 BCE) and Namoratunga in Kenya (c. 300 BCE) serving as astronomical observatories (Wade, 2009). Another field of major innovation was Metallurgy; iron smelting dates back to at least the 6th century BCE with the Nok culture in Nigeria (Franke, 2016). The renowned works from Ife and Benin attest to the artistic and technical mastery of bronze and brass casting, particularly using the lost-wax method (Ifeta, 2016). These accomplishments were not isolated incidents but reflections of linked intellectual legacies combining empirical observation, abstract thinking, technological experimentation, and knowledge transmission, both oral and, in some instances, written (Utsua, 2015). The denial, suppression, or marginalization of these indigenous knowledge systems during the colonial era resulted in a major epistemic loss (Jimoh, 2018). Hence, it is imperative for current decolonization movements to proactively restore, validate, and incorporate these indigenous intellectual legacies and approaches.

Economic life of precolonial Africa was characterized by trade networks. West Africa was linked with North Africa and the Mediterranean world by the Trans-Saharan trade routes, forming a vital nexus for commodities like salt, ivory, gold, slaves, textiles, and manufactured goods (Ross, 2010; Staros, 1996). This trade fueled the rise and wealth of empires like Ghana, Mali, and Songhai and fostered the growth of major urban centers such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenné (Neumark, 2013).

The cultural landscape of pre-colonial Africa was as varied and complex as its political and economic institutions. Artistic expression thrived in diverse forms, including sculpture, painting, music, dance, and rich oral literatures, serving many religious, political, social, and aesthetic purposes (Curnow, 2021; Masimba, 2017). Prominent examples include the terracotta figures of the Nok culture, the naturalistic bronze and brass heads of Ife, the intricate plaques of Benin, and Asante Kente cloth (Curnow, 2021; Hubbard, 2009; Mack, 2012). Pre-colonial aesthetics challenged later Western dichotomy between "fine art" and "craft" by typically integrating form and function (Shiner, 2012).

Beyond folklore and religious beliefs, sophisticated philosophical traditions flourished across the continent. Ideas like *Ubuntu* ("I am because we are") from Nguni Bantu peoples emphasized communitarianism and interconnectedness (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). Akan philosophy presented concepts such as Sankofa (learning from the past) and complex conceptions of personhood as something acquired through communal integration (Asante, 2022). African epistemology often contrasted with Western traditions by emphasizing holistic understanding, the integration of emotional and intuitive reason with analytical thought, the importance of experience, and the communal nature of knowledge validation (Hamminga, 2005). Knowledge was often viewed not merely as abstract but as a tool for moral and societal development (Seroto & Higgs, 2024).

The ethical frameworks that governed precolonial societies prioritized communal well-being, social harmony, reciprocity, and responsibility over individual rights (Metz, 2014). This focus on communalism and interconnectedness within indigenous African ethical heritage stands in stark contrast to the individualism often associated with the colonial and subsequent neo-liberal capitalist models imposed on the continent (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012).

This meticulous detailing of pre-colonial Africa's complexity and dynamism serves a crucial purpose: it establishes that Africa already possessed sophisticated models for governance, knowledge creation, economic organization, and artistic expression. This means decolonization is not about creating something entirely new from a blank slate, but rather about recovering, validating, and adapting existing, proven indigenous frameworks. This provides a powerful source of agency and self-determination for the decolonial project, moving it beyond mere critique of colonialism to a positive, constructive endeavour rooted in African heritage. It provides the "what to go back and get" for Productive Sankofarism.

The Colonial Legacy: Disruption and Enduring Impact

The late 19th century witnessed an accelerated and aggressive phase of European imperialism, known as the "Scramble for Africa," where European powers rapidly partitioned and colonized almost the entire continent

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between roughly 1880 and 1914 (Chamberlain, 2014). The Industrial Revolution in Europe created an insatiable demand for raw materials such as rubber, palm oil, cotton, minerals, timber, and ivory, all readily available in Africa (Wrigley, 2017). Politically, intense competition for territory fueled by fears of rivals gaining advantages, served as a significant motivation. This made acquiring colonies became a marker of national prestige and power (Barnhart, 2016). Moreover, these economic and political motivations were justified by ideological underpinnings, notably the widespread conviction in European racial and cultural superiority, usually seen through the prism of Social Darwinism and eugenics (Weikart, 1993). This manifested as the "civilizing mission" or "White Man's Burden," presenting colonization as a moral obligation to introduce Christianity, Western education, and European notions of progress to supposedly "primitive" African peoples (Liebersohn, 2016).

Despite strong African opposition, the relative each of European colonization of vast African territories, can be attributed to a convergence of factors that provided Europeans with clear advantages in the late 19th century. The development and deployment of advanced weapons provided European troops with immense firepower against African armies, who were often equipped with older weaponry (Black, 2000). This technological gap often proved decisive in military engagements. Furthermore, medical advancements, specifically the discovery and mass production of quinine, offered Europeans protection against malaria, a disease that had previously rendered large portions of the African interior perilous for them (Arnold, 1993). This allowed deeper penetration and sustained inland presence. Advances in transportation and communication enhanced logistical support, administration, and control over vast areas (Adeyemo, 2019; Brown, 2004).

European powers established administrative systems, broadly categorized as Direct and Indirect Rule, to manage their colonies. The aim was to maintain control, ensure economic exploitation, and facilitate resource extraction with minimal cost and resistance. While both sought control, direct rule involved a more overt replacement of indigenous structures (Boahen, 1985). Indirect rule, conversely, operated by manipulating and sometimes rigidifying ethnic identities and traditional authorities, thereby producing what Mahmood Mamdani termed a "bifurcated state" (Mamdani, 1996). This legacy of "decentralized despotism" (Cooper, 1997) created deep internal fractures, contested notions of legitimacy, and politicized ethnic identities in ways that posed unique challenges for nation-building after independence, distinct from the legacy of direct rule's more uniform imposition.

Colonial rule triggered significant and often catastrophic changes across African communities, altering political environments, cultural practices, and economic systems, thereby leaving legacies that continue to influence the continent. Western education systems were primarily established to train clerks and low-level colonial administrators (Abrokwaa, 2017), devaluing indigenous knowledge systems and promoting European values. This often resulted in the alienation of the educated elite from their own cultural roots (West, 2002). Traditional art forms suffered suppression, misinterpretation, and commodification. Viewed through a lens of "primitivism", Europeans stole artifacts for museums or collected them as curiosities without understanding their original context or aesthetic values (Rasssool, 2022). Notwithstanding this pressure, cultural hybridity also emerged as a site of resilience and adaptation, with Africans blending traditions to forge new identities (Eze, 2017).

The political fragmentation resulting from arbitrarily drawn borders is perhaps one of the most enduring and damaging legacies of colonialism is (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2016). Designed during the Scramble for Africa, these borders disregarded ethnic, linguistic, and historical realities, splitting unified groups across different states and forcing disparate or rival groups into single administrative units (Herbst, 1989). This partitioning has been directly linked to increased incidence and duration of civil conflict in the post-independence era (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2016).

Furthermore, indigenous industries and subsistence agriculture were neglected or actively undermined, leading to food insecurity in some regions (Ekubor, 2012). To ensure a supply of cheap labor for plantations, mines, and infrastructure projects, colonial administrations implemented coercive measures, including forced labor, indentured servitude, and the imposition of hut or poll taxes payable only in cash, thereby compelling Africans into the wage economy (Gardner, 2012). This entire system created patterns of economic dependency that

proved difficult to break after independence, forming the basis of neocolonial relationships (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2010).

The colonial encounter was not merely a political or economic imposition; it significantly reshaped the psychological landscape of both the colonizer and the colonized. The justification of colonialism as a "civilizing mission" constituted a profound form of epistemic violence (Liebersohn, 2016). It necessitated the active denial or devaluation of the intricate societies, advanced knowledge systems, and rich cultural heritage that existed in pre-colonial Africa. By presenting Africa as a place of lack, colonizers could legitimize their intervention while simultaneously destroying indigenous ways of knowing and being (Masaka, 2017). This act of epistemic injustice, which compelled Africans to view themselves and their heritage through a distorted and degrading European perspective, created psychological conditions that necessitated the "decolonizing the mind" component of contemporary liberation movements (Lynn, 2023).

Despite the persistent oppression, indigenous Africans were never passive recipients of colonial rule. Resistance was constant and diverse. Armed uprisings, though often ultimately suppressed by superior firepower, demonstrated active defiance (Kaoma, 2016). Intellectual and political movements like Négritude and Pan-Africanism emerged, asserting Black pride, reclaiming cultural heritage, and advocating for liberation (Elochukwu & Ozioko, 2024). Resistance against acculturation involved the tenacious preservation of indigenous languages, religious practices (sometimes through syncretism), music, dance, and storytelling (Falola, 2003). Perhaps most pervasive was everyday resistance, what James C. Scott termed the "infrapolitics" or "hidden transcripts" of subordinate groups (Scott, 1985). Paradoxically, even colonial education, designed for control and assimilation, inadvertently equipped some Africans with the linguistic and intellectual tools necessary to critique imperialism and articulate demands for freedom (Klein, 2018).

The interconnectedness of colonial mechanisms and their multi-generational impact is a critical aspect of this historical period. The economic motives that drove the Scramble for Africa were facilitated by technological superiority, which in turn enabled the imposition of administrative control. This control was justified by racist ideologies and reinforced by cultural and epistemic suppression. The arbitrary borders, for instance, were not merely lines on a map but a deliberate political tool, designed to "divide and rule," thereby creating inherent instability for future nations. This integrated approach to colonial rule forged a complex web of dependencies and internal divisions, such as the "bifurcated state," that became self-perpetuating problems long after formal independence. This systemic integration of various control mechanisms explains why post-colonial challenges are so deeply entrenched and difficult to overcome, as they are the intergenerational ripple effects of a multi-faceted, systematically applied colonial project.

From Liberation to Ongoing Struggles: The Post-Independence Context

The mid-20th century witnessed the emergence of powerful independence movements across Africa, driven by a profound desire for freedom from colonial rule and the assertion of self-determination. The core message was one of reclaiming sovereignty, dignity, and the right of African peoples to control their own destinies, without any external control and exploitation. Central to this liberation movement was the philosophy of Pan-Africanism, which advocated for the unity and solidarity of all people of African descent, on any part of the globe. Driven by the potent ideals of nationalism and Pan-Africanism, the independence era was thus imbued with immense promise—the hope for political freedom, economic growth, cultural rebirth, and continental unification.

However, the years following liberation brought significant difficulties for many Sub-Saharan African countries, impeding progress toward sustained economic growth and political stability. These challenges were intimately linked to the legacy of the colonial past. Walter Rodney's powerful thesis argued that Europe did not merely fail to develop Africa; rather, by systematically extracting wealth and stifling indigenous economic potential to support its own expansion, it actively underdeveloped the continent (Rodney, 2018). This perspective reinterprets the post-independence economic lag as a direct consequence of deeply ingrained global inequalities created during colonialism, rather than solely an internal failure.

African countries inherited state structures that were often authoritarian, extractive, lacking popular legitimacy, and disconnected from the societies they ruled (Noor, 2025). Building efficient, accountable, and inclusive governance institutions on these foundations proved immensely difficult (Rodney, 2018). As colonial rule receded, neocolonialism emerged. Kwame Nkrumah forcefully articulated the concept of neocolonialism, defining it as a state that is theoretically independent but whose economic system and political policies are controlled from outside (Udegbunam, 2020). This control could be exerted through multinational corporations, international financial institutions, aid conditionality, trade agreements, and cultural influence, thereby perpetuating economic exploitation and dependency without direct political administration (Abdullahi & Chembayi, 2025). This external interference reduced the capacity of African countries to pursue independent paths, diverted resources from development, and prolonged instability (Olajumoke, 2020).

Decades after independence, many African nations accrued significant debt, partly due to borrowing for development projects, falling commodity prices, and unfavorable global economic conditions (Ikejiaku, 2008). By the 1980s, a widespread debt crisis emerged. In response, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank imposed Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) as conditions for loans and debt relief (Mlambo, 1995).: Countries saw sharp cuts in public spending (especially on health and education), privatization of state-owned enterprises, elimination of subsidies, trade liberalization, and currency devaluation as part of austerity measures mandated by SAPs (Elu, 2000). These externally dictated policies failed to stimulate sustainable growth, but instead reinforced the extraction of resources for export—a process termed "unequal ecological exchange" (Jorgenson, 2006).

The contrast of the original "hope of independence" and the subsequent "burden of history" reveals a critical dynamic: the crucial first step of political independence was insufficient to dismantle the deeply ingrained systems of coloniality. The very structures inherited, coupled with new external pressures like neocolonialism, effectively trapped many nations in a cycle of dependency and conflict. This prevented the first emancipation hope from being completely realized. This systemic entrapment underscores that decolonization is a continuous, multi-faceted struggle against systemic forces that adapt and persist even after formal political rule ends. It highlights the necessity of the "deeper questioning" of legacies, as initially noted in the introduction. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the post-independence story is not one of consistent failure. Nations like Botswana and Mauritius are often cited as relative success stories, demonstrating that even under difficult conditions, sound governance, strategic resource management, and astute policy decisions can yield notable economic development (Silve, 2012).

Productive Sankofarism: A Framework for Future-Oriented Decolonization

The present conversation on decolonization in Africa marks a significant departure from the early battles for political freedom. While the first wave achieved official sovereignty, contemporary campaigns target the deeper, more insidious legacies of colonialism that persist in systems of knowledge, cultural norms, psychological attitudes, institutional practices, and global economic relations (Grosz-Ngaté, 2020). This movement seeks to dismantle the persistent Eurocentrism that often perpetuates epistemic violence by marginalizing or erasing indigenous knowledge systems (Makokotlela & Gumbo, 2025). The objectives are multifaceted: centering African experiences, histories, ideologies, and values in study and knowledge creation; recognizing, validating, renewing, and incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into education, research, and development; challenging the supremacy of colonial languages and supporting the use and growth of African languages to achieve linguistic decolonization; striving for "cognitive justice" by gaining the autonomy to think, theorize, interpret the world, and create methodology from African viewpoints free from Eurocentric hegemony; and overcoming the internalized inferiority and alienation stemming from colonial domination, a process often referred to as "decolonizing the mind" (Grosz-Ngaté, 2020).

This contemporary emphasis on the "coloniality of power, knowledge, and being" (Ndlovu, 2024) distinguishes decolonization as a mission intended to liberate not only land but also minds, cultures, and epistemologies from the persistent grasp of colonialism. It reflects a shift toward a more thorough and profound form of freedom than that achieved solely through political independence.

The Akan concept and Adinkra symbol, Sankofa, offers a powerful philosophical grounding for the decolonizing project. Literally meaning "go back and get it" (*san* - return*; ko* - go*; fa* - fetch/seek/take), it is often associated with the adage, "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten" (Asante, 2022). Visually represented either as a stylized heart or, more famously, as a bird with its feet planted forward while its head turns backward to retrieve an egg (symbolizing the future or precious knowledge) from its back (Asante, 2022), Sankofa symbolizes the wisdom of learning from the past to inform and build a better future. Sankofa emphasizes respect for history, ancestry, and heritage. It serves as a crucial instrument for recovering knowledge, cultural practices, and identities lost, suppressed, or denigrated during periods of upheaval like the slave trade and colonialism. This makes it particularly relevant for the African diaspora seeking connection to their roots. The concept inherently links the past, present, and future. While the backward glance acknowledges the necessity of understanding origins and history to guide the present, the bird's forward-facing feet indicate movement into the future (Okrah, 2008). Sankofa is an active recovery and application of historical knowledge rather than mere passive remembrance.

Critical examination is vital to Sankofa's wisdom. It entails acknowledging the complexity of the past—its positive and negative aspects, its victories and traumas, its knowledge and its mistakes—to discern what is truly useful and valuable for the present and future. It averts from uncritically praising or reproducing everything from the past. While the intrinsic versatility of Sankofa allows for its broad application, this also creates a challenge. Its popularization, especially as a symbol of heritage connection in the diaspora (Diop, 2014), risks diminishing its significance to mere nostalgia or identity affirmation. This apparent superficiality contradicts the deeper call of the concept for critical engagement. Therefore, a truly productive application of Sankofa must actively reject romanticism and embrace the rigorous effort of assessing the past, selecting what is genuinely relevant for contemporary issues, and innovating based on that recovered knowledge.

Productive Sankofarism is proposed here as a paradigm for critical, future-oriented decolonization, building on the Akan wisdom of Sankofa while deliberately confronting the potential pitfalls of romanticizing the past. It moves beyond mere retrieval to emphasize *selection, adaptation, and innovation* based on past knowledge, directly addressing contemporary issues and future aspirations.[1] By stressing a dynamic and critical interaction with heritage, it directly addresses criticisms of "cultural nostalgia" or static traditionalism (Balogun & Woldegiorgis, 2025).

Productive Sankofarism involves several key components:

- **Knowing the Past Critically**: This demands a profound, nuanced understanding of Africa's multifaceted history—the strengths and diversity of pre-colonial societies, the specific mechanisms and consequences of colonial disturbance, the complexities and contradictions of post-independence struggles, and the continuing influence of neocolonialism and globalization (Slater, 2019). It means acknowledging painful truths alongside successes, recognizing both the wisdom and the violence ingrained in the past. This knowledge forms the essential foundation for informed action.

- **Critical and Selective Retrieval**: This is the essence of the "go back and get it" directive, but with a vital focus on discernment. It means identifying particular components from the past—knowledge systems, philosophical ideas, ethical values, social practices, aesthetic values, technological advances—that offer relevant insights or provide potential solutions for contemporary challenges and future aspirations (Balogun & Woldegiorgis, 2025). This selection process must be critical, recognizing that not all traditions are inherently beneficial, fair, or relevant in the current context. It rejects the notion of returning to a "pure" or monolithic past.

- **Adaptation and Innovation**: Productive Sankofarism is fundamentally future-oriented. It does not seek to replicate the past but rather to *adapt* recovered components to function effectively within present realities. Moreover, it inspires *innovation* by using historical knowledge and principles as a springboard for developing entirely new solutions, potentially combining valuable insights from indigenous heritage with useful knowledge from other parts of the globe (Balogun & Woldegiorgis, 2025). It rejects the idea of static, unchanging traditions, embracing dynamism by acknowledging that African cultures have always evolved and adapted (Akpang, 2013).

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- **Future Empowerment**: The ultimate goal is not the restoration of a bygone era but the forging of a self-determined, prosperous, fair, and culturally vibrant future.[1] This links Productive Sankofarism to forward-looking movements like Afrofuturism, which uses heritage and imagination to envision alternative futures free from historical constraints (Preston, 2025).

- **Agency-Centered**: This framework emphasizes African agency in defining problems, selecting relevant historical resources, adapting them, and guiding the future direction (Grosz-Ngaté, 2020). It is a rejection of externally imposed development models or solutions and an assertion of the right and capacity for self-definition and innovation.

Kwasi Wiredu's "conceptual decolonization" project exemplifies Productive Sankofarism in the philosophical domain (Adejoh *et al*, 2024). His call to critically evaluate ideas absorbed through colonial languages (the negative program) and to consciously explore and utilize indigenous conceptual frameworks (the positive program) parallels the process of critical retrieval and re-centering characteristic of Productive Sankofarism. This approach avoids merely dismissing Western philosophy wholesale but stresses judging its ideas through the prism of African linguistic and cultural circumstances, while also extracting indigenous traditions for philosophical insights relevant to contemporary issues.

The progression from Sankofa as a cultural concept to its refinement as "Productive Sankofarism" reveals a crucial development. While Sankofa initially serves as a wisdom concept about learning from the past, this paper identifies the risk of it being reduced to "mere nostalgia or identity affirmation." Productive Sankofarism is presented as a necessary refinement to avoid this superficiality. This development underscores that Productive Sankofarism transcends a simple cultural adage to become a robust *epistemological and methodological framework* for knowledge production and application in a decolonial context. It is a structured approach to engaging with history that actively incorporates critical thinking, discernment, and future-oriented problem-solving. This makes it a powerful tool for academic and practical application, particularly in arts education, where it can guide curriculum development and pedagogical approaches. Its emphasis on "agency-centered" action further elevates it from a passive concept to an active, empowering methodology for self-determination in knowledge.

Essentially, Productive Sankofarism provides a methodology for negotiating the intricate interaction between past, present, and future within the framework of decolonization. It views heritage not as a static archive but as a dynamic resource for critical reflection, creative adaptation, and empowered action toward a self-defined future.

Decolonial Praxis in Arts Education: Applying Productive Sankofarism

Applying the concept of Productive Sankofarism to arts education in African institutions offers a pathway to transcend the persistent legacies of coloniality and create learning spaces that are culturally rooted, critically engaged, and creatively innovative. This necessitates both a critique of existing systems and the proactive inclusion of indigenous perspectives and practices.

Many arts programs in African higher education institutions continue to reflect Eurocentric ideas, even decades after independence (English & Heilbronn, 2024). This is manifested in several ways:

- **Dominance of Western Canon**: Curricula often prioritize and present European and North American art history, aesthetic theories, and artistic techniques as universal standards. African art, when included, may be presented peripherally or through a Western theoretical lens.

- **Marginalization of Indigenous Arts**: The rich variety of African artistic traditions—sculpture, textiles, masquerade, performance, oral arts, body adornment, and architecture—is often underrepresented or relegated to ethnographic or anthropological studies rather than being engaged as living aesthetic systems (Ocholla, 2007). The colonial-era perspective of African art as "primitive," "tribal," or merely "functional" (Anoldi, 2009) continues to subtly affect its academic valuation, overlooking its philosophical depth and aesthetic sophistication.

- **Curriculum as Violence**: Ignoring or devaluing the histories, languages, cultures, and ways of knowing of indigenous students in curricula can constitute a form of "curriculum violence" that alienates them and undermines their self-worth (Kasfir, 2007).

- **Pedagogical Shortcomings**: Teaching strategies often mimic Western models, disregarding culturally relevant pedagogies that could incorporate African learning styles, oral traditions, or community-based approaches. By imposing colonial languages as the basic medium of instruction, students are further alienated from indigenous conceptual frameworks. There is typically inadequate emphasis on fostering critical awareness of the historical context, power relations, and political dimensions of art production and reception (English & Heilbronn, 2024).

Productive Sankofarism offers a framework for radically transforming arts education by critically recovering and incorporating Africa's own artistic and intellectual legacy through:

- **Curriculum Reform**: This entails moving beyond simply adding "African content" to genuinely centering African art histories, diverse continental and diasporic artistic traditions, aesthetic values, and philosophical foundations. This includes studying pre-colonial artistic accomplishments and techniques, critically analyzing the impact of colonialism on art forms and markets, and exploring the work of contemporary African artists who engage with heritage, identity, and decolonization.

- **Integrating IKS and Philosophies**: African epistemologies (how knowledge is acquired), ontologies (understandings of being), and ethics (e.g., Ubuntu's emphasis on community, Sankofa's cyclical view of time) should guide not only the *content* but also the *approach* to artistic creation, critique, and pedagogy. African philosophical ideas can offer frameworks for comprehending aesthetics, the artist's place in society, and the spiritual or communal aspects of art often overlooked by Western theory (Mungwini, 2011).

- **Reclaiming Aesthetics**: Arts education must actively question and move beyond imposed Western standards of beauty, form, and artistic value. This means investigating and validating indigenous aesthetic ideas, including complex abstraction, creativity within traditional forms, the blending of art with social function, symbolism, and spiritual resonance (Murrell, 2008). It also means analyzing the hybrid artistic forms that developed through colonial encounters and post-colonial adaptations, acknowledging them as valid expressions of evolving identities (Akpang, 2013).

This approach necessitates a fundamental *epistemological shift* within art education. It calls for acknowledging African aesthetics, philosophies, and knowledge systems, including oral traditions, as legitimate sources for both practical artistic creativity and rigorous theoretical knowledge. This challenges the colonial tradition that frequently divided "art" from "craft," "theory" from "practice," and "intellectual" from "spiritual" or "communal".

Decolonizing arts education extends beyond course material to *how* art is taught and learned. Productive Sankofarism inspires pedagogical innovation grounded in African contexts and values by:

- **Integrating Oral Traditions**: Pedagogy can incorporate storytelling, proverbs, myths, music, song, and performance not only as topics of study but also as active teaching tools and sources of creative inspiration, given the centrality of orality in many African cultures (Seroto & Higgs, 2024). Oral literature should be regarded as a major field, and its performative qualities integrated into studio practice and critical analysis.

- **Community-Based and Socially Engaged Learning**: It is crucial to dismantle the barriers separating the university and the community. This involves collaborating with indigenous knowledge holders (IKH) to promote learning through apprenticeship models in addition to formal education (Seroto & Higgs, 2024). Supporting socially engaged art initiatives helps students use their talents to address real-world community issues, thereby fostering relevance and social responsibility. This approach directly

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addresses the alienation often caused by purely theoretical or Western-focused colonial education models by grounding learning in lived experiences and validating students' cultural contexts.

- **Critical Pedagogy**: Arts education must cultivate students' ability to think critically about the power dynamics inherent in art production, representation, and reception. This requires analyzing the history of colonialism and its impact on art, understanding issues of cultural appropriation, critiquing Eurocentric biases, and examining the politics of the global art market. Students should be encouraged to engage in "epistemic defiance"—questioning dominant paradigms and asserting alternative ways of knowing and creating. Pedagogy should foster student agency and voice, creating safe spaces for dialogue, challenging assumptions, and exploring art as a tool for social commentary and transformation (Sultana, 2019).

The critique of the global art market, which frequently marginalizes or exoticizes African artists and reinforces unequal power relations, underscores the need for this critical pedagogical dimension. A Productive Sankofarist arts education must equip students with the critical awareness and strategic tools to navigate, challenge, and potentially transform these external, often neocolonial, market dynamics, asserting their agency on a global stage rather than solely focusing on internal curriculum change.[1]

The specific application of Productive Sankofarism to arts education is highly significant. Arts education is identified as a field "naturally connected to identity, culture, and social thought". The critique of Eurocentric dominance within arts education mirrors the broader "coloniality of knowledge" discussed earlier. This connection implies that arts education is not merely one area to be decolonized; it serves as a microcosm where the principles of Productive Sankofarism can be most effectively demonstrated and, crucially, as a catalyst for broader societal decolonization. Art, as a powerful medium for identity formation, cultural expression, and critical commentary, holds immense transformative potential. By decolonizing arts education, institutions are not just revising a curriculum; they are empowering future cultural producers to reshape narratives, challenge dominant ideologies, and foster critical consciousness throughout society. This makes arts education a strategic entry point for a more comprehensive decolonial project, as it directly influences cultural production and public discourse.

Cultivating Transformative Change: Mindsets and Institutional Pathways

Implementing Productive Sankofarism as a decolonial praxis, particularly in arts education, extends beyond simply altering curricula or teaching strategies. It necessitates the development of specific attitudes and ways of thinking among teachers, students, policymakers, and the broader society. These attitudes are not merely outcomes but essential preconditions for a productive engagement with the past to empower the future.

Essential mindsets for effective Productive Sankofarism include:

- **Critical Historical Awareness**: A heightened understanding of the historical weight of colonialism and neocolonialism is fundamental, recognizing how these forces have shaped present realities, institutions, and ways of thinking (Sultana, 2019). This includes recognising power dynamics, Eurocentric biases, and one's own positionality within these structures. Crucially, this critical lens must be applied not only to external influences but also to indigenous traditions and knowledge, enabling a discerning evaluation of what is truly valuable and relevant for the present and future.

- **Agency and Self-Determination**: Embracing Productive Sankofarism calls for a strong conviction in the ability of African people to shape their own reality, examine their own issues, and create their own solutions. This means rejecting narratives of victimhood or perpetual dependency and asserting the right to intellectual and cultural autonomy— Ngọgĩ wa Thiong'o's call to "see ourselves clearly".

- **Openness to Innovation and Adaptation**: Rooted in heritage, Productive Sankofarism is inherently forward-looking. It demands openness to change, creativity, and adaptation. This involves a willingness to combine useful elements from indigenous cultures with beneficial aspects of modernity or global

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knowledge, to create hybrid solutions suited for contemporary African contexts. It requires moving beyond rigid adherence to tradition or wholesale rejection of external ideas.

- **Collaborative and Communitarian Spirit**: Inspired by African philosophical traditions like Ubuntu, Ujamaa, and Harambee, a spirit of cooperation, mutual support, and collective responsibility is essential. This is vital for knowledge generation (e.g., co-production with communities), development projects, and promoting regional integration to harness collective strength.

- **Critical Respect for Heritage**: Valuing the past—indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, historical experiences—is fundamental. Yet, this appreciation must be critical, not blind. It means understanding context, accepting complexities (including negative elements), and distinguishing timeless wisdom from behaviors that may no longer be relevant or just.

Nurturing these mindsets is crucial for the effective application of Productive Sankofarism. Without them, attempts at decolonization risk becoming performative, falling into unproductive nostalgia, or merely substituting one form of dogma for another. A major consideration is the possible conflict between the essential task of reclaiming and centering Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and the equally important need for innovation and engagement with global scientific and technological advancements vital for contemporary development. Productive Sankofarism must navigate this carefully by fostering an intellectual environment where IKS is not treated as a static repository of past practices, but as a dynamic source of principles, values, and methodologies. These indigenous insights (e.g., holistic perspectives, ecological wisdom, communal problem-solving approaches, unique aesthetic sensibilities) can then be critically integrated with, adapted alongside, and contribute uniquely to global innovation, rather than being seen as mutually exclusive alternatives. This approach allows Africa to leverage its unique heritage as a source of innovation for addressing contemporary challenges, from climate change adaptation to sustainable development and artistic expression.

The discussion of both "essential mindsets" and "recommendations for implementing Productive Sankofarism in Higher Education" highlights a crucial interdependence for sustained decolonization. Individual attitudes, if not supported by institutional structures, risk remaining isolated ideals or facing systemic resistance. Conversely, institutional changes without a corresponding shift in individual attitudes can become performative or superficial, lacking genuine transformative power. For example, promoting African languages (an institutional action) requires faculty and students who value and are willing to use them (an individual mindset). Similarly, a "collaborative spirit" (a mindset) is best fostered within structures that enable "curriculum co-creation" (an institutional action). This indicates that decolonization is a complex, iterative process requiring simultaneous and aligned transformation at both the personal and systemic levels, emphasizing the holistic nature of the challenge and the solution.

Putting Productive Sankofarism into practice within universities, especially in arts faculties, calls for concrete institutional actions:

- **Institutional Commitment**: University administration must officially support and integrate the principles of decolonization and Productive Sankofarism into strategic plans, mission statements, curriculum review procedures, and quality assurance frameworks. This requires allocating dedicated resources for curriculum development, the inclusion of IKS, faculty training in decolonial pedagogies, and research supporting these objectives.

- **Curriculum Co-creation**: A shift away from top-down curriculum design is necessary. Procedures for meaningful collaboration involving faculty, students, artists, community leaders, indigenous knowledge holders (IKH), and cultural practitioners in the redesign of arts curricula must be established. This ensures relevance, inclusiveness, and grounding in various African realities and epistemologies.

- **Pedagogical Development**: Investment in professional development for educators emphasizing critical, culturally responsive, and decolonial teaching strategies is essential. This should cover training

on how to properly include oral traditions, support community-based learning initiatives, encourage critical discussion about power and representation, and build inclusive classrooms.

- **Support for IKS Research and Integration**: Dedicated research centers, programs, or projects focused on the documentation, validation, preservation, and ethical integration of IKS across disciplines, including the arts, should be established. This means developing methodologies for respectfully engaging with IKS and translating this knowledge into academic and creative contexts.

- **Promotion of African Languages**: Actively promoting and providing platforms for the use of African languages in academic research, artistic creation, teaching, and critical discourse within the university is crucial. This could involve assisting translation initiatives, multilingual publications, and performances.

- **Fostering Critical Dialogue**: Regularly organizing seminars, workshops, public lectures, exhibitions, and publications that provide venues for open and critical debate on decolonization, the meaning and application of Sankofa, the complexity of African identity, the function of the arts in society, and the obligations of the university is vital. These suggestions demand a sustained commitment and willingness to challenge accepted standards and systems within higher education.

CONCLUSION

This exploration has traversed the historical landscape of Sub-Saharan Africa, aiming to comprehend the intricate interplay of identity, heritage, and the enduring quest for self-determination within the context of decolonizing arts education. The journey commenced by highlighting the colonial erasure of Africa's past, subsequently emphasizing the dynamism, diversity, and sophistication of pre-colonial societies, their complex political structures, knowledge systems, and rich cultural worlds. The profound rupture caused by the colonial encounter was then examined, revealing the motivations for European conquest, the enabling factors, the control mechanisms employed, and their deep and lasting effects on African cultures, governments, economies, and psyches. The arc of liberation, marked by the aspirations of freedom and Pan-Africanism, exposed the ongoing challenges stemming from colonial legacies, neocolonial pressures, and internal governance obstacles that continue to impede progress.

Against this backdrop, the contemporary decolonization movement emerges not merely as a political project but as a profound intellectual, cultural, and epistemic endeavor aimed at eradicating the "coloniality" that persists even after formal independence. Within this context, the Akan concept of Sankofa—looking back to recover—offers potent wisdom. However, recognizing the risks of uncritical nostalgia, this paper proposed Productive Sankofarism as a necessary refinement: a framework demanding critical, selective retrieval and adaptation of heritage, focused on innovation and future empowerment. This approach facilitates navigating the complexities of "Identity within my IDENTITY," reflecting the layered consciousness of contemporary Africans shaped by multiple historical influences. When critically engaged and artistically reinterpreted for the present, it offers a path beyond cycles of critique and dependency toward constructive, agency-driven action rooted in Africa's own rich intellectual and cultural resources.

Applied specifically to arts education, Productive Sankofarism provides a transformative praxis. It advocates for a fundamental shift away from Eurocentric supremacy toward curricula and pedagogies that center African aesthetics, philosophies, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. It inspires the inclusion of oral traditions, community engagement, and critical pedagogy to foster not just creative skills but also cultural pride, critical awareness, and social responsibility. By equipping developing artists with the tools to critically engage their heritage, negotiate contemporary realities (including the complexities of the global art market), and create from a place of cultural grounding, Productive Sankofarism can foster artistic voices that are genuinely African and globally relevant.

The comprehensive analysis underscores that decolonization, particularly through the lens of Productive Sankofarism, is not a fixed destination or a singular event, but an ongoing, generative process of continuous engagement, adaptation, and creation. It is about building and rebuilding, constantly negotiating the past with

the present to shape the future. This implies that the "future" is not a static endpoint but a perpetually evolving construct, and that the work of decolonization is never truly "finished" but rather transforms as new challenges and opportunities arise. This positions decolonization as a living, breathing, and inherently creative endeavor, especially pertinent for arts education.

Ultimately, adopting Productive Sankofarism in our institutions and broader societies is about more than just curricular change or recovering the past. It is about cultivating the attitudes—critical awareness, agency, innovation, collaboration, and critical respect for heritage—required to transcend historical limitations and proactively forge a self-determined future. It is a call to engage with the past as a source of wisdom from which inspiration can be drawn to build new realities, shaping futures that honor predecessors and empower future generations, rather than viewing heritage as a burden or a rigid blueprint.

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